Advice to Organizers: Jane McAlevey's Legacy

Reviewed by Alan Singer

Jane McAlevey was one of the most successful union organizers in the United States during the last three decades. Sadly, she died from cancer in July 2024 at age 59. After she was diagnosed with cancer in 2010, she spent much of her time earning a doctorate in Sociology from the CUNY Graduate Center and writing. Her advice to progressive organizers was always to convince the unconvinced instead of preaching to those who already agree with you. In magazine articles, five books, classrooms, and podcasts McAlevey argued that labor unions led by rank-and-file activists were the best way to challenge economic inequality and the institutionalized political power of the rich. Classes and workshops she offered through the Berlin-based Rosa Luxemburg Foundation and the University of California Berkeley Labor Center had thousands of participants and were translated into dozens of languages.

Key to McAlevey's approach to building a progressive working-class movement is spending more time in what she called deep organizing and less time in shallow mobilizing. McAlevey was also dismissive of advocacy as a substitute for grassroots organizing. For McAlevey, organizing involves listening to the people you want to reach so you can respond to their concerns, show how they are addressed by progressive action, and recruit them to the movement. Mobilizing is important because it brings together people who agree with you, but McAlevey argues it does not change minds or bring in new people. McAlevey argues that the labor movement of the 1930s and the African American Civil Rights movement were successful because they established structures people could become part of: unions, churches, and community groups, that sustained struggle over a long term. Mobilizations are temporary and then people go home. Advocacy involves lobbying by so-called experts who are part of the existing system; it ignores the need to build a grass roots movement and accepts the class power structure, albeit with some modification. McAlevey explained her approach to organizing in "Building the Power to Win," a video available on YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0SDcB3Ifqw0&t=21s).

We can see the impact of all three of versions of union action in a comparison between AFT locals in Chicago and New York City. In NO SHORTCUTS: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age (Oxford University Press, updated in 2018), which was based on her doctoral dissertation, McAlevey examined the Chicago Teachers Union's campaign to build community support prior to its 2012 strike. The CTU built a broad coalition by portraying the mayor and the Chicago School Board as the enemy of teachers, parents, and children (131-135).

In NO SHORTCUTS, McAlevey completely ignored the New York City teachers' union local, the United Federation of Teachers that I am more familiar with, probably because she considered them an example of how unions are not supposed act. Both the CTU and the UFT use mobilization marches and protests as strategies. However, while the CTU built alliances by addressing the shared concerns of teachers, parents, and students and encouraging the staff's sense of mission as educators, the UFT acts as if it is a partner with the city's Department of Education. It sells the union to its members as a fee-for-service and advocacy agency headed by professional leaders who support union members by working with city and state officials, negotiating contracts, and ensuring that grievance procedures are followed. Increasingly this has been a disastrous approach. In the past the UFT traded away pension benefits for new hires to secure raises for its current members, but as the new hires became a larger portion of the teaching force and union membership, they became highly critical of the UFT leadership. More recently, the UFT leadership and New York City agreed to reduce retiree health options which led to an open rebellion against the union leadership and the election of an opposition slate to represent retiree interests.

In a new edition to NO SHORTCUTS published in 2018, McAlevey argued that Donald Trump was elected President of the United States in 2016 by "turning the working class not against bosses and bankers but against one another." The messages she believes the labor movement must promote as they organize workers and defeat the reactionary forces that support Trump are that unions are essential for ensuring decent lives for the working class and that "Without basic economic justice to underpin it, democracy cannot thrive – or survive" (New Preface, 2018 edition).

Some of McAlevey's key recommendations for union organizers are that they must convince workers that the union is their organization, the "collective experience of workers in struggle," not a fee-for-service agency provided by union officials. She explained that organizers should see worker anger as a positive force for change and not try to defuse it; that organizers had to believe it was possible to defeat the bosses, but they also needed to be honest with workers about the risks they faced as they built unions; that organizers should never underestimate the ability and power of the people they are trying to organize; and that organizers had to communicate excitement, energy, and urgency, but shouldn't talk too much while doing it. They must make sure the people they want to organize have voice (Opening insert in the 2016 edition).

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McAlevey did not cite Paulo Freire, but her approach is similar to the organizing strategy Freire promoted in Brazil in the 1960s and described in his book Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Seabury, 1973). For Freire, the key to successful organizing is liberating the voice of the oppressed so they realize their collective power. McAlevey's focus on developing grassroots organic leaders like the Norma Rae character played by Sally Fields in the 1979 movie Norma Rae is very similar to the approach advocated by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci in his Prison Notebooks (International Publishers, 1971). Gramsci argued that organic intellectuals from the working class were the crucial connection between grassroot movements and radical political parties (122), they are the teachers who convey broader ideas about society to workers, but also explain the insights and experiences of workers to movement leaders. McAlevey documents the way successful union organizers in the 1930s studied pre-exiting working-class social groups to identify and target the community's organic leadership, including the wives of workers (34-37). These are the people who sustain worker agency during difficult struggles (39).

In NO SHORT CUTS, McAlevey is very critical of the top-down John L. Lewis-style business unionism adopted by "New Labor" in the 1970s that dominates the AFL-CIO and unions like the UFT, especially their advocacy of collaboration with management as a junior partner that manages labor as one factor of production (18-19). As part of this approach, the AFL and CIO (who did not merge into one organization until 1955) drove their most effective grassroot organizers out of the labor movement in the 1950s because of their radical beliefs, radicalism that had made them so effective. McAlevey believes the business unionist New Labor approach to unionization is contemptuous of workers and cites discussions within the AFL-CIO where national organizing directors complained that workers got in the way of their plans (51). She argues that the repeated abandonment of the successful union organizing strategies of the 1930s and the shift to a managers of labor concept of unions intended to appease corporate power and maintain control by the union's hierarchy is one cause of the weakening of the labor movement in the United States.

According to McAlevey, appeasement never works because corporations maximize profits and maintain political power by undermining union organizing efforts. I agree. The AFT mobilized for the election of Barack Obama in 2008, only to have Obama as President and Arne Duncan, his Secretary of Education, impose testing mandates to evaluate students and teachers and value-added models that the union opposed, that blamed teachers for student failure, and profited major publishers and testing companies like Pearson. Defeating Donald Trump in 2024 is a teachers' union priority, but once again the AFT provides uncritical support for the Democratic Party candidate instead of insisting on input into the party's platform position on education.

Superficially, McAlevey seems to echo Saul Alinsky's strategy in *Reveille for Radicals* (Vintage, 1946) and *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals* (Vintage, 1971) that organizers should focus on listening to the concerns of the people they hope to organize and the importance of grassroots movements, however, in NO SHORTCUTS, McAlevey is very critical of the Alinsky approach. Alinsky believed that the organizer should not bring their own values, what he called dogma, into the struggle; McAlevey is very clear that she is championing member-run democratic labor unions and challenging both entrenched bureaucracy and corporate power. McAlevey, unlike Alinsky organizers, wants to fundamentally alter the power structure that keeps workers and unions in check, not just modify it to achieve short term benefits (40-41). While Alinsky claimed his goal was maximizing freedom within a capitalist society, McAlevey argues that the capitalist workplace is far from a zone of freedom (43). She also points out that Alinsky's ideology-free pragmatic approach to organizing has been employed by the Tea Party, Christian nationalist groups, opponents of abortion rights, and assorted rightwing activists in campaigns to limit freedom (41-42).

McAlevy opened the concluding chapter of NO SHORTCUTS with a quote from Poor People's Movement by Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward (Vintage, 1977: 6). Piven had been McAlevy's doctoral advisor and a major influence on her academic work. Piven and Cloward wrote "the poor are led to believe that their destitution is deserved, and that the riches and power that others command are also deserved." McAlevey argues that the self-blame of those without and their acceptance of the legitimacy that some have so much is "the biggest success of the neoliberal project" because it "demobilizes people" (199). Since most of the remaining unionized workforce in the United States is in the public sector and is employed by different levels of government, McAlvey believes that rightwing attacks on government and calls for tax cuts are part of their coordinated effort to break unions and leave workers totally subject to the power of the wealthy (200). She also believes that working people have an underlying belief in class solidarity despite the culture of self-blame that can be marshaled to defeat corporate power (202).

On Long Island and across the United States, campaigns to unionize Starbucks workers appear to be successfully deploying a McAlevey approach to union organizing. The organizing drives operate on a very local store-by-store level, leadership is coming from workers in the stores, and besides wage and hour demands, we see insistence that employees be treated with dignity by the corporation and by its customers. Winning has become contagious. Despite the fact that Starbucks has fired union activists on trumped up charges, the more stores that organize local union chapters, the more workers demand the right to organize. Being fired by Starbucks for union activism has almost become a badge of honor.

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